

# NIAGARA *this* WEEK

## [Hockey tourney for homeless Regular Joes get to play alongside big-name NHL players](#)

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Next to being stranded on an idyllic desert island with a leggy supermodel, it's a dream date most guys would drool over: getting to lace up the skates, schmooze and slap around the puck with some of the biggest names in professional hockey.

For a select few Niagara men, it's an opportunity that will come true on Jan. 27, when the non-profit group Hockey Helps the Homeless holds a Fantasy Hockey Event at the Gale Centre in Niagara Falls.

The group, which has raised more than \$3.5 million for initiatives to combat homelessness since its first hockey tournament was held in Toronto in 1996, aims to raise \$100,000 in its first Niagara event to benefit community agencies that provide services to people without a roof over their heads and those at risk of becoming homeless.

Gary Scullion, co-founder and executive director of Hockey Helps the Homeless, said the group's origins came at a time when the city of Toronto was trying to clean its streets up of the homeless and so-called 'squeegee kids' who pestered motorists for cash while washing their windshields. From the proceeds of that first tournament, his group purchased 50 survival kits including such items as duffel bags, sleeping bags, hats and non-perishable food. He still vividly recalls going out on to the streets and meeting the homeless while distributing the kits.

"It was a life-changing experience," he said.

Since then, the group has expanded to hold tournaments in other major Canadian cities. Niagara is the first smaller market to get a tournament. NHL hockey legend Marcel Dionne, who was at Tuesday's press conference, said the homeless are often more visible in big cities. But he said they're out there in Niagara, too.

"You always think of it in the big cities," he said. "They're tough to locate" in Niagara, he said. "You don't see them."

Dave Pellette, manager of housing, hostels and homeless for Niagara's regional government, said statistics show many people in the region are eking out a living.

In 2010, more than 4,200 people sought shelter at emergency beds the Region funds, and more than 9,000 people received support to get them out of homelessness or to prevent becoming homeless.

Pellette said 37.5 per cent of food bank users in Niagara are kids, and more than 5,000 families are on waiting lists for affordable housing — many for years.

Many Niagara families have to make tough decisions such as either paying the hydro bill or putting food on the table, or either staying in a shelter or becoming homeless, he said.

“In Niagara, a lot of households face stark choices,” he said. “These are very troubling numbers.”

In the upcoming tournament, participants on 10 teams will pay \$300 apiece and be asked to fundraise. That will give them a personalized jersey, three games along former NHL players, even dressing alongside them. A hearty lunch, beverages, a silent auction featuring hockey memorabilia and guest speakers at a banquet are included, too.

Anthony Pasto, chair of the Niagara tournament, cited the “wow factor” in Niagara residents getting to play alongside hockey heroes. NHL stars such as Kris King, Mark Osborne and Gary Leeman are among those who have taken part in past tournaments.

He said his group, which is busy working on sponsorships, will donate the funds to three community agencies in Niagara: YWCA Niagara, Bethlehem Housing and Support Services and The Raft. The agencies provide a range of services for the homeless and people at risk.

Pasto said he couldn't at first believe it when he heard there are 30 agencies in Niagara providing food bank and homelessness services. “It was shocking to me,” he said.

To register for the tournament, learn more or donate online, visit [www.hockeyhelpsthehomeless.com](http://www.hockeyhelpsthehomeless.com)